

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

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28 August 1984

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Mining of the Red Sea

Nineteen merchant ships have suffered damage from mine-like explosions while sailing through the Red Sea since 9 July. We believe the ships struck sea mines most likely laid by a Libyan ship that was in the area in July, but the evidence is not conclusive. The relatively light damage experienced by most ships suggests a modern mine with a small warhead was used. Shipping, meanwhile, has continued through the Suez Canal at near normal levels while US, Soviet, Western European and regional navies conduct mine clearing operations centered in the Gulf of Suez, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait at the mouth of the Red Sea, and opposite the Saudi Arabian ports of Jidda and Yanbu.

The Mine Incidents and Shipping Industry Reaction

Approximately half of the mining incidents took place in the Gulf of Suez; the other half occurred near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. All the Gulf of Suez explosions occurred before 30 July, while those near the mouth of the Red Sea took place after 30 July. The last reported incident was on 15 August. There was a brief drop in shipping through the Suez Canal in early August, but canal transits have returned to their normal level of 50-60 ships per day. Insurance rates have not been increased for ships in the region.

The Mines

The most likely mine being used is the Italian-made "Manta" anti-invasion mine or one very similar. This type mine has a warhead of about 100 kg and is capable of operating in water up to 100 meters deep, characteristics consistent with the location and light-to-moderate damage ships have received from the mysterious explosions in the Red Sea. Both Libya and Iran in the past have expressed strong interest in acquiring Manta-type mines. These mines are available on the world market.

A second, though less likely, possibility is that the mines are a device constructed in a third world country using an unsophisticated design. A larger number of these less

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sophisticated devices would have been required, however, to obtain the same number of hits, thus increasing the chance that one or more would have been recovered or at least detected by now.

Who Planted the Mines

The evidence is circumstantial but implicates Libya. Analysis of crew member lists suggests the Libyan Navy's chief frogman was on the Libyan arms carrier Ghat when it passed through the Suez Canal three days before the first reported explosion. We speculate that he supervised the mining.

- The Ghat's crew list indicates that the ship's alternate master was Zuher A. Adram, born in 1946, and that he joined the Ghat's crew on 30 June, just prior to the ship's departure from Libya to deliver arms to Ethiopia.
- Other information indicates that a Lieutenant Commander Zahir Adham, commander of a Libyan naval base, and head of Libya's frogman training program, was born in 1946, and has extensive training in underwater mine placement. Adham's middle name is Abd al-Salam, which would account for the middle initial on the crew list.
- Another member of the crew who also came aboard on 30 June was Hani J. Wanis, the same name as another officer in the Libyan navy.

We have other evidence implicating the Libyans.

- A list of the crew now manning the Ghat, currently in Marseilles for repairs, shows a complete change in the crew from the one that transited the Suez Canal last month. The changeover suggests that Libya is concerned about possible security leaks if French officials were to question the crew.
- The Soviet military attache in Amman reportedly has claimed that Moscow is furious because it believes Libya may have used Soviet-made mines in the Red Sea, which he said the USSR had provided Tripoli in mid-1960s.
- Libya has a variety of underwater mines in its inventory that could have been used and we cannot rule out that it has acquired "Manta" or manta-type mines.

Libyan Motives

Qadhafi may be making good on threats made last June against Arab regimes who fail to unite against Israel and the United States. Qadhafi wants to seize the initiative in regional affairs from the moderate Arab regimes and the mining would be

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one way to emphasize to Arab moderates the consequences of close relations with Washington. Qadhafi may also view the mining as a means to embarrass the Mubarak government by highlighting Cairo's dependence for security on the United States and Western Europe. He may also have anticipated that the mining would hurt Egypt and Sudan economically.

Speculation in the international press of Libyan involvement has again thrust Qadhafi, with his appetite for notoriety, to center stage. At the same time, the inability of anyone to prove conclusively Tripoli's involvement minimizes the possibility of a retaliatory response from the West or from Egypt.

Other Possibilities

Anonymous callers representing "Islamic Jihad" twice publicly claimed responsibility for planting some 190 mines in the Red Sea. Several Middle Eastern terrorists groups clandestinely associated with Iran use "Islamic Jihad" as a cover name for their operations.

We doubt that terrorist organizations have the capability to lay mines at sea without extensive state assistance. The only capability these groups are known to possess is attaching limpet mines to ships in port.

Similarly, we believe the Iranians have too large an economic stake in the Red Sea shipping lanes to risk closing them. Iran is the Canal's fourth-ranking user in terms of total imports and exports; by contrast Libyan use of the Canal is minimal. Ayatollah Khomeini, Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani, Prime Minister Musavi, and Iran's chief judge now have all publicly disavowed Iran's involvement in the mining. Their statements suggest that Iran's leaders are concerned about the adverse impact closure of the Suez Canal could have on the Iranian economy.

Regional Response

Egypt's primary concern is to prevent disruption of Suez Canal traffic in order to protect canal revenues, which account for 10 percent of Cairo's foreign exchange earnings. The Egyptians initially downplayed the mine threat while discreetly requesting US assistance in clearing operations. Soon the mining incidents became too numerous to conceal and the Egyptians began to publicize their countermeasures. Cairo

- Began detaining, inspecting, and escorting Libyan, Iranian, and other suspect ships;

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- Declared its right (under Article 10 of the Constantinople Convention) to bar from passage any country that jeopardizes the safety of navigation through the Canal;
- Publicized US mine-clearing assistance and requested assistance from France, the UK, and Italy;
- Deployed additional naval assets to bases in the Gulf of Suez.

Cairo also is concerned about foreign and domestic criticism that it is using the mining issue as a pretext to sponsor a Western military presence in the region. In order to avoid such charges, Cairo has:

- limited the number of foreign participants and referred other offers of assistance to countries such as Sudan;
- Kept coordination of foreign assistance at the military-to-military, rather than government-to-government, level;
- Suggested, with little response, that Arab littoral states hold a conference on the security of the Red Sea.

Saudi Arabia expects the United States to take the lead in coordinating efforts to clear international waters, but has agreed to assume most of the cost of minesweeping operations in Saudi waters. The Saudis have been particularly concerned about the safety of ships carrying Muslim pilgrims to the Hajj via the ports of Jidda and Yanbu. The Saudis have agreed to the temporary basing of a US support group in Saudi Arabia for the recently completed mineclearing operations off Jidda and Yanbu, but they are unwilling to move to the Red Sea any of their four minesweepers now in the Persian Gulf.

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North Yemen's two Soviet-made minesweepers are working near the main port of Hodeidah, [redacted] Soviet advisers are probably assisting the Yemeni navy, but [redacted] [redacted] North Yemen has refused additional Soviet offers of help. North Yemen has not requested help from the United States or Western Europe.

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South Yemen proposed in early August a meeting of North Yemen, South Yemen, Ethiopia and Djibouti to discuss a common response to mine explosions in the Southern Red Sea. Aden has stressed its view that regional states could handle the mine threat without foreign help, probably to prevent Western minesweeping near its waters. Since then, however, South Yemen has not pressed the issue. According to press reports, Aden has discussed the explosions with Moscow. South Yemen has no minesweepers [redacted]

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France has provided four modern minehunters, a diver support ship and a logistics ship. Two of the minehunters--which also can sweep mines--the logistics ship, and the diver support ship are operating in Saudi waters. Two of France's newest minehunters are active in Egyptian waters in the Gulf of Suez.

Three Italian minehunters and a logistics support ship are due to arrive in the Gulf of Suez by the end of August. These were modernized with advanced US minehunting sonar in the early 1970s.

Two modern Dutch minehunters will be in the area in about two weeks at the request of Saudi Arabia.

Countermine Capabilities

US and West European mine clearance forces in the Gulf of Suez are equipped with state-of-the-art minehunting systems. The US helicopter-towed devices, however, are currently the only system in the Gulf of Suez actually capable of sweeping acoustic/magnetic bottom mines. Soviet capabilities are presumed to have improved since their participation in the 1974 Suez Canal mineclearing operation, when they demonstrated a capability only to sweep the older moored contact mines. Modern mines incorporate a number of sophisticated anti-sweeping and hunting measures, however, and a Manta-type mine might never be recovered.

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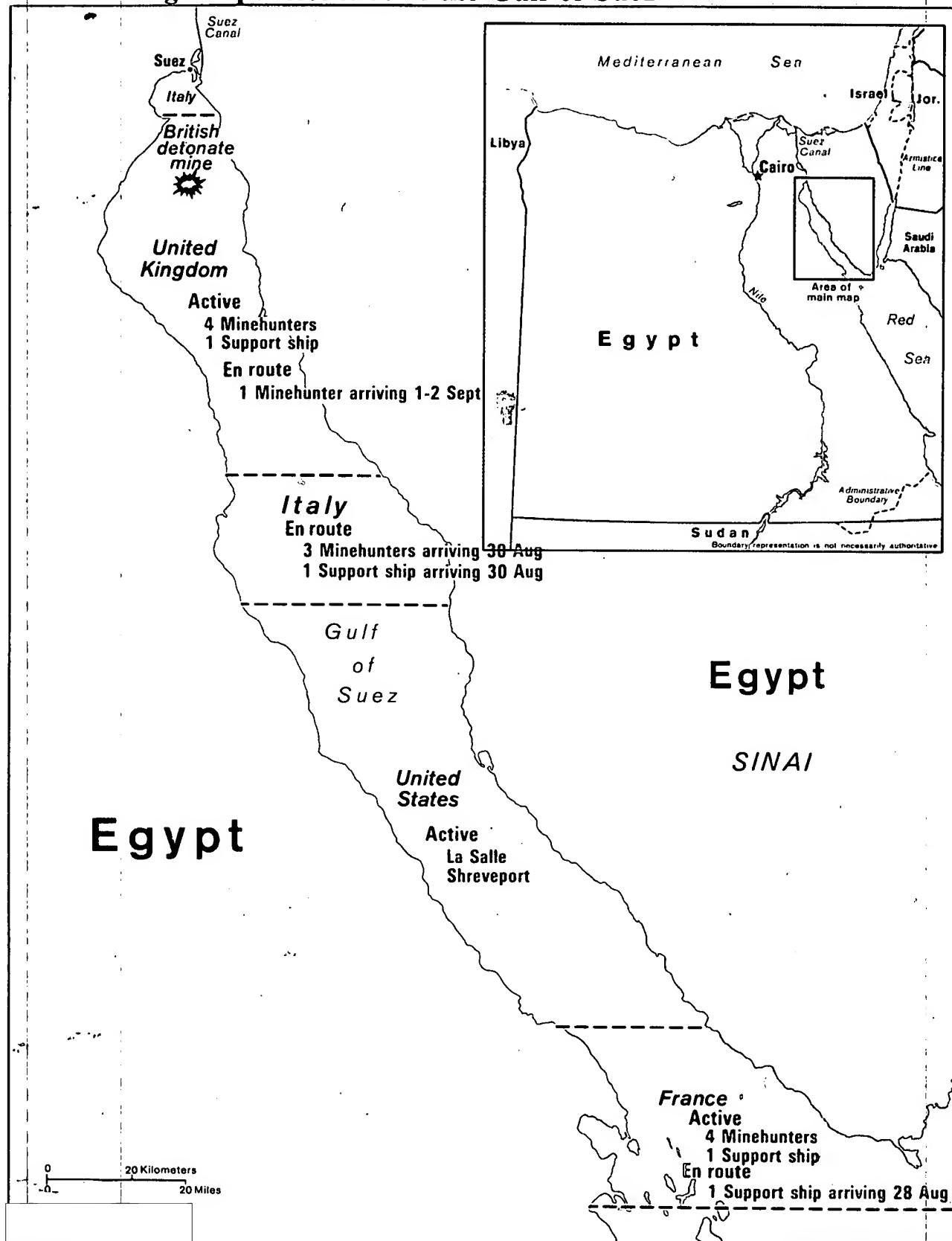
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Minehunting Responsibilities in the Gulf of Suez



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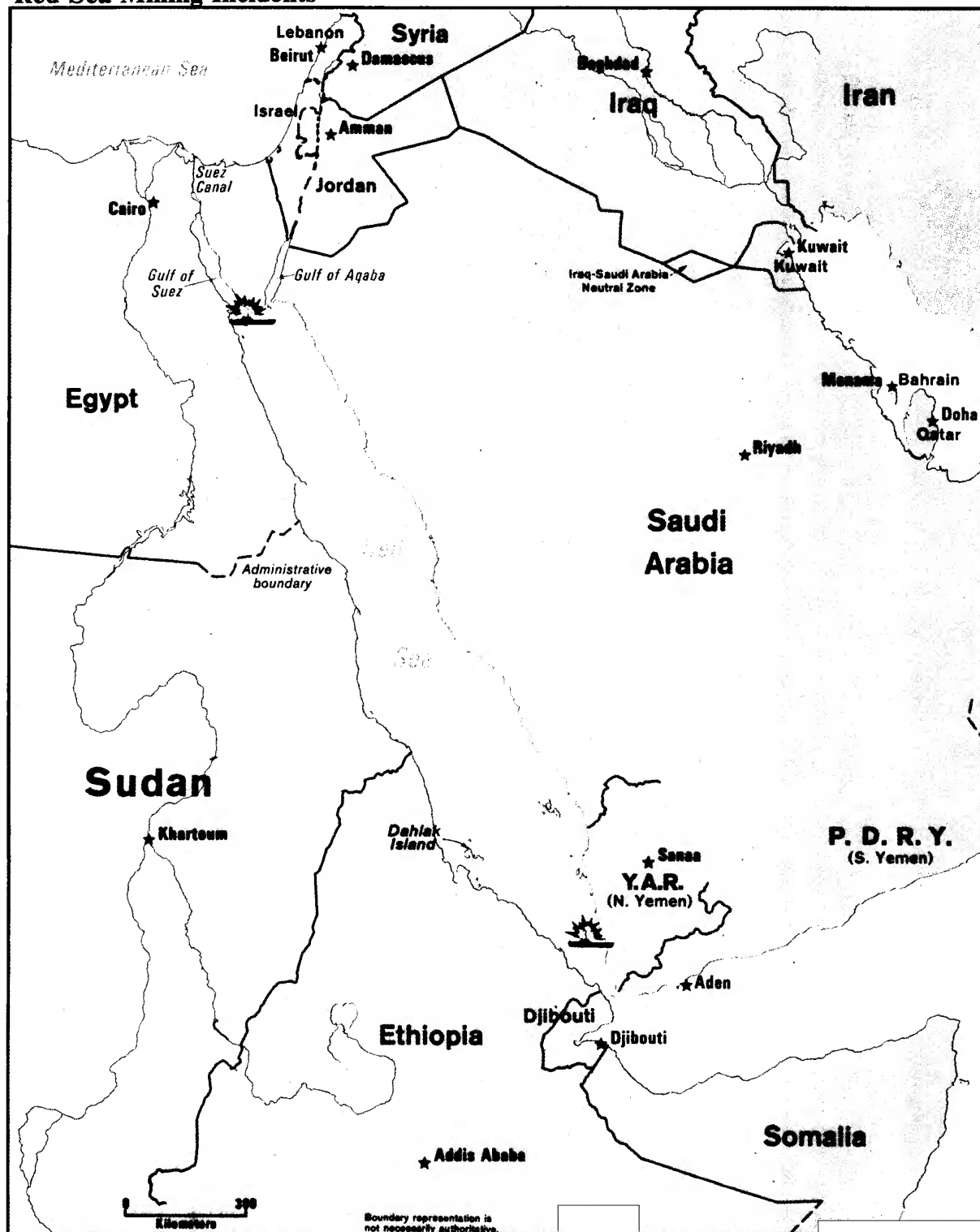
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Red Sea Mining Incidents



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